



A weekly question/answer column

How Safe Are Herbal Medicines?

Nedra K. Christensen answers:*

Herbal medicinal sales increased nearly 60% in 1997, accounting for \$3.24 billion in sales (as reported in a research study in the “Archives of Internal Medicine”). In 1997, 60 million Americans stated that they had used herbs in the previous year, yet 70% did not reveal their herbal use to their physicians or pharmacists. Sale of herbal medicines is big business, yet consumers must be aware of the adverse consequences, as well as the benefits.

Here is a list of commonly used herbal medicines, drugs with known potential drug-herb interactions and drugs that can have enhanced effects if taken at the same time as an herb.

- **Echinacea** if used beyond 8 weeks could cause hepato-toxicity and should not be used with other known hepato-toxic drugs such as anabolic steroids, amiodarone, methotrexate, ketoconazole.
- **Feverfew** is used for migraine headaches, yet its usefulness may be negated with nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs.
- **Feverfew, garlic, ginko, ginger** and **ginseng** may alter bleeding time and should not be taken concomitantly with warfarin.
- **Valenan**, used for insomnia, should not be used with barbiturates because excessive sedation may occur.
- **Evening primrose oil** and **borage** should not be used with anti-convulsants because they may lower seizure threshold.
- Immunostimulants (**echinacea** and **zinc**) should not be given with immunosuppressants (**corticosteroids** and **cyclosporine**).
- **Tannic acid** present in some herbs (e.g., St. John’s wort and saw palmetto) may inhibit absorption of iron.
- **Kelp**, as a source of iodine, may interfere with thyroid replacement therapies.
- **Licorice** can offset the pharmacological effect of spironolactone.
- **Karela** and **Ginseng** may affect blood glucose levels and should not be used in patients with diabetes.

Herbs can be helpful and do provide pharmacologic action, but careful consideration of other medications and dosage of herbs must be made before use.

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